

Digging into Our “Hidden Collections”: Maximizing Staff Skills and Technology to Enhance Access to Special Collections

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“Exposing Hidden Collections,” the 2003 conference organized by ARL’s Special Collections Task Force, heightened awareness of the extent of uncataloged and unprocessed special collections languishing in academic and research libraries and the need to provide access to these distinct, and sometimes unique, collections. Additional reports and proposals at the national and state level have urged libraries to set priorities, establish best practices, and streamline workflows in order to optimize discovery of their hidden collections. The University of California, Davis, General Library has significantly reduced its arrearage of special collections materials (including rare books, pamphlets, and ephemera) and increased patron usage by focusing on UCD’s research specialties, utilizing staff language skills, and facilitating original cataloging and authority work. A project team at UCLA is focused on accelerating the description of undocumented rare books and archival materials held in Special Collections. Some unexpected “gems” have been discovered in the process.

Background and Literature Review

Academic institutions and research libraries hold special collections which consist of resources not found elsewhere; a comprehensive study of the extent of these collections was performed in 1998 by Panitch (p. 12-13). While general monographs have the characteristic of being widely-distributed (that is, a publisher distributes a print run), special collections by their nature exist at only one location. A special collections library’s scope and collection development policy may guide the acquisition of materials towards building distinctive collections (ones with a singular *fond*, or provenance). As the ARL Special Collections Task Force members noted (Jones, 2003; ARL conference, 2003)¹, a strong need exists to devote professional attention to making special collections accessible, in a level similar to that afforded to general collections. The descriptions to be performed on special materials cannot rely on copy produced elsewhere (e.g. by the Library of Congress’ CIP² or the Program for Cooperative Cataloging partners). In order to describe these special, local materials, librarians are now able to access training in the handling and processing of special materials through Rare Book Schools (Rare Book School, 1983; California Rare Book School, 2005; Midwest Book and Manuscript Studies, 2007), the Catalogers Learning Workshop (PCC et al, 2000), and regional affiliate workshops (Clark, 2005).

Achieving a rare books cataloging workflow, a first step toward reducing a backlog of special materials, involves consultation with the best practices and recent trends in both archival processing and library technical services. In consulting with these two areas, it is beneficial to

¹ This work drew on an ARL survey of special collections (Panitch, 1998), currently the topic of an OCLC Research survey (Dooley, 2009).

² The value of the Cataloging in Publication program as it relates to library cataloging in general is described in the R2 report, “Library of Congress Study of the North American MARC Records Marketplace” (Fischer, 2009, 26-27).

outline the theoretical commonalities relevant to both professional environments. Particular partnerships can mutually benefit in the areas of training, workflow, supplies and equipment, network environments, outreach, and research conduct. Just as the 2003 ARL summit instigated a “call to action” among special collections librarians, the publication of the “More Product, Less Process (MPLP)” article (Greene and Meissner, 2005, 255-256) summoned similar acknowledgement among archivists and manuscript curators. Common to both the archival science and library science disciplines are emphases on maximizing resource effectiveness and participating in scholarly communication activities (Cox, 1999, e.g.). Additionally, the iSchools organization highlights the technological commonalities in contemporary library and information science (LIS) education (iSchools, 2005; ALISE, 2009). Regarding library cataloging, the formation of the LC Working Group on the Future of Bibliographic Control provoked several defenses and positioning of the activity of cataloging as forming the “core” of librarianship, from which many other library activities are derived (Anderson et al, 2007; Yee, 1987, 2). This perspective argues that without description of the items held by the institution³, patrons cannot access intellectually or form even a cursory understanding of the institution’s strengths and uniqueness. The distinction between archival and monograph processing is often a delicate one, and one that varies according to the institution and the level of description required of a collection.

Descriptive Cataloging

Towards the identity of rare books cataloging, standards development has taken the form of reports and publications convened by volunteer committee. The ALA/ACRL/RBMS Bibliographic Standards Committee has had a particularly influential role in the development and promulgation of descriptive standards applied to a range of special materials. The Committee has defined the range of said format categories: Books, Serials, Music, Graphics, Cartographic, Manuscripts, and Manuscripts: Ancient, Medieval, Renaissance, and Early Modern (RBMS). Each of these now-seven collection areas are synthesized in a manual of Rules, collectively called the Descriptive Cataloging of Rare Materials (DCRM) (RBMS/LC). As they are published and revised, these professional outputs are often cited and utilized in cataloging classes as the basis for a given training module or exercise. Institutions also may adopt a strict or modified version of these standards as a matter of policy for its professional librarians and catalogers to apply in their work (UIUC). Additionally, CARL members work within an academic-oriented environment which values the peer evaluation of our work, and continual interactions and cross-analysis of different collections’ needs and research value shape the application of cataloging principles.

Collection-level descriptive records are often merited in the place of, or alongside, individual item records. Catalogers are able to describe in these records the unique historical or provenance-based contexts which would otherwise be lost or inapt in single-item records. Special note fields in item-level monograph records direct the patron to search for the collection-level record in order to read the scope and content note of the entire collection to which the item belongs (e.g., at UCLA). Other reasons may compel the creation of collection-level records (e.g. the function of documentation and explained reasoning for acquisition, and the intellectual

³ Note the publication of the new “Statement of International Cataloguing Principles” which was approved by LC and worldwide participants in January 2009 (IFLA), after eight years of effort. It replaces IFLA’s Paris Principles of 1961.

gathering of non-book or otherwise cumbersome materials), as stated in the paper “Collection Level Cataloging” (Fletcher, 2003, 2-3) and its subsequent publication as an appendix to DCRM(Books) (RBMS/LC, 2008).

Inter-communication among libraries remains a primary concern, and uniform processing guidelines – applied in current backlog efforts – support participation in standards development both theoretically and practically. Several initiatives are afoot in technical services environments which focus on procedural consolidation, such as 1) use of the terms “UC collection” and its plural (campuses’ subject and research strengths) (Ayers, 2009), 2) outcomes of the Bibliographic Services Task Force (UC Libraries, 2005), 3) serials processing through a CONSER funnel (Bross, 2010, 155-156), and 4) proposals to work in shared files⁴. (Adoption of the WorldCat Local pilot was heavily recommended at the UC University Librarians’ level by the BSTF Final Report of 2005). Current efforts in special collections are focused on both backlog remediation and backlog prevention (Weideman, 2006, 276-277). Descriptive work is performed within an institution’s access tool(s) which are increasingly online rather than just onsite. As seen in Fig. 1, modern catalogers work across a range of interface systems, which cleverly reflect the institution’s identity as a whole. Catalogers prepare rare book records for the use of patrons, with an emphasis on objectivity, clarity of holdings, and “wayfinding” through multiple access points (i.e. search commands).



Fig. 1. Diversity in library catalogs

The needs of Special Collections materials have been considered in efforts surrounding union catalogs and shared resource databases. Regarding the relationship of local institutional catalogs to a proposed union catalog, attention to the technical specifications which would enable coordination between the two databases is currently ongoing. Concerns about several specific

⁴ The “shared file” principle concerns metadata creation, and places value on vendors’ and publishers’ roles in the bibliographic supply chain. Currently adopted in the PCC Mission Statement (2009), and through Library of Congress’s continuing work with publisher’s ONIX metadata.

issues were raised in a report by the WorldCat Local Special Collections Task Force (OCLC, 2008; Kircher, 2009), the top two of which are: 1) the lack of display of local notes fields, and 2) the lack of indexing of institution-specific access points (i.e. provenance, form/genre, binding, binder, publication date, printer/publisher, other codes). Granularity is a demonstrable component of special collections cataloging, as seen in some meticulously detailed rare book records. Still, many benefits to the library result from more rapid reduction of special collections backlogs, including 1) double-purchase prevention, 2) intellectual access to breadth and depth, and 3) security. In these efforts, we ultimately recognize that our fully-processed collections are not uniformed “little boxes” of predictability. On the contrary, the academic and research libraries of our state are too unique individually, and are filled with far too many distinctive resources, to ever possibly be subject to one solution.

Librarianship Methods

Analyzing materials at the collection level involves consideration of several unique situations and concerns. The institutional imperative to address what has now been identified as a nationwide concern, is a practice that varies across institutions (public, private, and independent). Efforts undertaken since the 2003 ARL conference (a “turning point”), reflect the range of institutional practices already in place, as well as ongoing efforts to align the work of library cataloging with new online developments. As librarians and catalogers, we are cognizant of both the broad categorical imperatives as well as our need to localize procedures which cannot yet, at all, be written in the aggregate.

The UC Davis Library has approached the issue of “hidden collections” by 1) implementing a course of action at the local level, focused on the specific needs and the specific priorities of an individual institution, and 2) developing site-specific models for dealing with these challenges based on resources and staffs available, and individual strengths and aptitudes that can be identified, utilized, and developed. Until the 1990s, all Special Collections cataloging had been handled by librarians. Then budget crises and early retirement incentives led to a loss of more than half of the librarian positions in cataloging. It was acknowledged that not all materials in Special Collections were rare books, or would benefit from rare book cataloging, and that capable and interested copy catalogers could be trained to handle most of the twentieth-century books.

Lesson One

Organizing cataloging around collections can result in more visible progress overall. Copy catalogers who had not previously assigned subject headings or call numbers were enabled to perform original cataloging in specific subject areas, defined by sub-collections organized by the Rare Books Librarian. When one individual is assigned to a collection, the person’s training can be focused and subject knowledge once acquired can be re-applied to future cataloging, resulting in increased efficiency and quality.

For example, UCD Special Collections developed a collection focused on regional small press publications and authors after the Rare Books Librarian wrote a grant proposal for processing the papers of poet and environmental writer Gary Snyder. The collection included many small press publications, or limited editions, owned by Snyder. Having noted a significant body of uncataloged and uncollected literature, we took the opportunity to develop a specific new collection in this area. Since a significant percentage of this ongoing collection is not represented in WorldCat, the cataloger who became the specialist for this collection was initially

faced with a lot of original cataloging, authority work, and special challenges, but was able to provide valuable records to local, state, and national databases, and was able to utilize her knowledge and experience as we added more titles from these same authors and presses.

Lesson Two

It is valuable to try to match suitable individuals with suitable projects whenever possible and to provide them with the training and guidance they need to succeed. When a person has the opportunity to work on cataloging they personally find interesting, they do a significantly better job and are willing to learn more. When a person has the opportunity to be challenged and succeed, they develop a sense of accomplishment. Good projects create happy catalogers – happy catalogers produce good projects.

For example, at UC Davis we have one person assigned to catalog **all** of our radical pamphlets – over the course of the last several years he has cataloged over 18,000 pamphlets, thousands of which required original cataloging. After training and revision of his original cataloging, he became increasingly confident and now works independently, with the option of asking for advice when needed or passing on problematic material to a librarian. The more we give him, the more accomplished and productive he becomes. Finding someone with knowledge of a subject and also enthusiasm for it, has resulted in someone who loves his work to the same degree that we love his results. In this instance, the quality and specialized nature of his work led to a job reclassification.

Lesson Three

Re-assess items that have previously been cataloged at only the collection level. At issue: a large collection of uncataloged wine pamphlets, and a collection of scarce wine pamphlets bound together with no access to individual titles or specific topics. Not surprisingly both collections were seldom used. After disbinding, a merged collection of some 2,000 wine pamphlets was cataloged by a specialist cataloger in a matter of several months – revealing for the first time to the universe of wine researchers many hundreds of pamphlets for which no previous bibliographic records had been available.

Lesson Four

Do what you can now, and follow up later with more – when that becomes possible. At issue: a pre-1801 rare book backlog (typical of those found in nearly all large research libraries). Always aware of our rare book collection, our backlog came to forefront when the librarian giving a tour to a professor specializing in the history of science happened to show her the uncataloged part of the collection. The professor pointed out a book that she had previously traveled to the British Library to use because that was the only copy she knew to be available. The situation had to be addressed, particularly after several other hidden treasures were identified with enthusiasm. In response to pleas from the Special Collections Department brief bibliographic records were created, so that researchers would at least know that a title was available at UC Davis. The Principal Cataloger instructed the copy catalogers participating in this “quick copy” project to include author, short title, and date in each bibliographic description and to devise a call number incorporating the book’s accession number and beginning “IP” for “in process,” followed by a two-letter abbreviation for language. This project was completed ahead of schedule and provided a shelf list of heretofore unidentified and uncounted books,

arranged by language. While catalogers prefer to “handle it once,” the Principal Cataloger began the process – almost concluded – of bringing these records up to full rare book cataloging standards. Books invisible for decades emerged finally into the sunlight. The “IP” call numbers allowed us to chart our progress as the books were fully cataloged and received LC call numbers. Only five IP call numbers remain (representing scores, serials, and various issues including completion of the appropriate DCRM manual).

This project also illustrates lessons one and two. Grouping the books by language (and then by subject as much as possible) facilitated later descriptive cataloging and authority work. Assigning copy catalogers to the large collections of mostly twentieth century books enabled librarians to concentrate on the early printed books. The Principal Cataloger had training - “Rare book cataloging” and “Introduction to descriptive bibliography” courses from the Rare Book School (1983) at Columbia University, as well as a RBMS Preconference workshop on cataloging Latin works (1993) - relevant subject and language education, and over thirty years of experience in rare book cataloging, including primary responsibility for absorbing a pre-1801 backlog at another university library. Books in Latin comprised more than half of the UC Davis pre-1801 cataloging backlog, as would be expected. While vernacular European languages gradually replaced Latin for literary and historical works, Latin continued for many years as the universal language of science, as the scientifically oriented UCD collection demonstrates.

Lesson Five

Mainstream, streamline, expedite, exploit. At UC Davis, Special Collections cataloging is “mainstreamed” within a comprehensive cataloging department and is shared among catalogers of various job classifications. While catalogers respect Special Collections, particularly rare books, they do not fear them. Becoming more familiar and expert in cataloging these materials through training and experience makes catalogers more comfortable handling them, describing them, and speeding them on their way. The Special Collections Department has improved its process of prioritizing and organizing the uncataloged collections and making them accessible to catalogers.

Rare book workflows have been streamlined. DCRM (RBMS/LC, 2007) is embraced as a tool that facilitates the description of early printed books and is not viewed as an imposition of additional rules. Observing cataloging standards can enable us to share bibliographic records – even for rare materials. WorldCat records for pre-1801 books are input; member records are used; master records are enriched, upgraded, and enhanced; duplicates are reported. OCLC credits for original records, as well as for upgrade and enhance transactions, have helped offset the expense of preparing more detailed bibliographic records for special collections. Books that can be described adequately by “regular cataloging” are not over cataloged just because their location is “Special Collections.”

Online resources are consulted whenever possible. The RBMS Bibliographic Standards Committee Web site provides a wealth of guidance and references to other useful sites. Serendipitous searches in online resources include travel and tourism sites which provide historic information (Latin place names, locations and names of old monasteries, botanical gardens) and sites for collectors of various objects which may provide surprisingly relevant information for special collections cataloging. Personal name searches retrieve references (sometimes in footnotes) to more obscure authors who would not rate an entry in a biographical reference work. Authority work for authors writing under both Latin and vernacular names is facilitated when the name can be found in a reference source (defined broadly). Abbreviations appearing “at head of

title” – such as Q.D.B.V. (Quod Deus bene vertat, “May God grant success”) or Q.F.F.S. (Quod felix faustumque sit, “May this be fortunate and favorable”) – can be identified as not belonging in the title transcription.

Lesson Six

It is okay for cataloging to be fun, and intellectually stimulating to people. We as academic institutions lose nothing from our staffs loving their work – but rather, instead, we gain a great deal. We go forth, bright torch in hand, exposing hidden collections and unknown treasures, and having a lot of fun doing it.

Results

A table of selected OCLC record numbers, reflecting recent cataloging work (input, enhanced, or enriched), appears as Table 1.

Table 1 <i>Selected OCLC record numbers, input or enhanced/enriched by UCD:</i>	
22012032	UCD reported 5 duplicate records; later merged by OCLC as seen in 019 field. UCD (OCLC symbol is CUV) updated some data; two other libraries added some more fields. Cooperative cataloging of a 1536 book through WorldCat.
42260135	DCRM(B) helps make sense of the transcription of u/v in Latin titles. This 1555 title is in English but the u/v usage is reminiscent of Latin transcription. The value of a 246 field to provide additional title access in normalized modern style is demonstrated here. Appendix F of DCRM(B) offers guidance for providing additional title access.
503629286	Detached article; UCD identified its parent serial through a search of Eighteenth Century Collections Online and then input an original bib record with appropriate 500 note and 730 added entry. The digitized article, accessible online, facilitated cataloging of this otherwise elusive late 18 th century article.
238803033	Library’s copy had torn title page; imprint and edition statement for this 1769 book supplied through online search of international library catalogs. Original input required; 500 note with \$5 explains limitations of copy cataloged and sources for supplied information.
423072834	Collection of French laws, mainly on wine. An online search confirmed that the “general farmers” (Fermiers generaux) were not getting dirt under their fingernails; they were tax collectors.
51405636	Dutch text. An online search of an obscure name resulted in an English summary of the discovery of the tomb of Ovid’s supposed relatives. The tomb is interesting, with extensive mural art, but the Nasoni family was not related to Ovid, since Naso was his nickname, not a family name. UCD added the second half of the subject headings.
68569908	Manuscript volumes dated 1825-1829 serve as a catalog of three royal gardens according to the system of Linne. The surname of Jacques, the author and gardener, could not be determined. His patron was identified as the future King Louis Philippe of France. Online searches of the place names helped identify the gardens, especially with several candidates for some of the locations. One of the gardens became a public park. This unique item sat in the UCD backlog with no

	paperwork and no explanation. The original WorldCat record is my best guess after following several clues.
54537160	NLM had very minimal cataloging for this unconvincing 1854 hype for a health spa. In German, printed in black letter. An online translation of the title led to eventually enlisting the help of an individual who learned to read German in Germany – and in black letter. The title really does suggest that the cold pure water will enhance female figures as well as female health, but the text does not explain much. “Enhancement” could not be included in the subject heading because it would mean surgical enhancement.
535220541	American history and American popular culture combine in this description of the Susan B. Anthony Cracker Jack prize, which is actually a tiny paper booklet. An online search proved invaluable in determining the probable date of manufacture. SBA was one of the first paper prizes offered, and the Cracker Jack fans and prize collectors were not amused, even though customer safety was the reason for discontinuing the small, hard, easily-swallowed-by-mistake objects.
<i>Cooperative cataloging examples:</i>	
37423986	Detached article on the slave trade had appeared in parts, in three issues of a serial, thus the added entries for the three separate titles. Record later incorporated (without change) into the Texas Southern University, Special Collections’ Heartman Collection, which “contains over 11,000 books, pamphlets, slave narratives, journals, musical scores, and other documents relating to the black experience in the United States and the world.”
56357488	Magazine article; processed as “in analytic,” an approach not often taken, but justified in this case: a Playboy interview of Martin Luther King by Alex Haley. Record later incorporated (without change) into the catalog of the University of South Carolina for the archival collection “William Bagwell Papers.”

Conclusions

The cataloging of special collections materials strengthens and distinguishes an institution. Providing full access to materials which researchers cannot find elsewhere (or not without significant travel expense) demonstrates the vitality of the library as a place of learning and knowledge creation. Awareness of national trends regarding monograph description, technical services, and archival processing allows institutions to formulate guidelines which enhance overall access through records that are interoperable and intelligible off-site. Creativity, flexibility in use of technology, and thoughtful consideration of staff skills can produce results satisfactory to both catalogers and administrators. Through cataloging efforts developed at the local level, original bibliographic records have been added to OCLC WorldCat, UC’s Melvyl, and the ESTC (English Short Title Catalog). These online databases extend the reach of cataloging activities to researchers located worldwide.

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